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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 LAGOS 000376

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/W, INR/AA
STATE PASS NSC FOR BOBBY PITTMAN

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PM KDEM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH GOVERNORS FORUM
LEADER SARAKI ON YAR'ADUA'S HEALTH, CABINET RESHUFFLE, AND
EX-GOVERNOR IBORI

REF: A. ABUJA 1898

1B. ABUJA 1595

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBIN R. SANDERS Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: During Ambassador,s first trip to Kwara State in western Nigeria, she had an opportunity to have several meetings with Kwara State Governor and head of the powerful Governor,s Forum (GF), Bukola Saraki September 21-22. He met with the Ambassador just after finishing a 3-hour session with Yar,Adua, where he said they were "finishing up touches on personalities in the next cabinet." In the hour long one-on-one with Ambassador, Saraki reviewed the current state of play in Nigerian Northern and national politics, President Yar,Adua,s health issues and the impact on the atmosphere in Nigeria, the upcoming cabinet reshuffle and Niger Delta issues, and made comments about some of the key people around the President such as National Security Advisor Muktar, and (in response to the Ambassador,s questions) about the President,s Aide de Camp (ADC). Saraki is in his mid-forties, a medical doctor, dynamic, and hails from a strong, powerful family, rumored to have made their wealth in oil, which has controlled Kwara State off and on for generations. Under his leadership, the GF, in combination with other northern governors including the Governors of Kaduna, Borno, Kano (although not from the ruling PDP), and Katsina, have become the new power entity within the North.

12. (C) Saraki and these younger Northern governors believe that they have demonstrated their prowess over the last eight months as they have gotten President Yar,Adua to respond to many of their requests, including, they believe, controlling the PDP and blocking both former Presidents Obasanjo and Babingida from seating their candidates as PDP chairmen. On the southern side, in addition to the Governor of Lagos, Niger Delta Governors of Rivers and Bayelsa States also have come into their own, influencing issues for their region by virtue of their access to President Yar,Adua. Saraki noted in the meeting that most governors like Yar,Adua "because he does not meddle in their State affairs, quite different from former President Obasanjo." In addition to this background, Saraki made comments on the state of play in politics, the upcoming cabinet reshuffle, personalities around Yar,Adua, and ex-Delta governor James Ibori as he relates to the EFCC and the U.S. position on the EFCC.

¶13. (C) Governor Saraki began our discussion with the words "let's be frank," as he opened up about the sentiments of the President and his inner circle (which includes Saraki) on the U.S. posture on the EFCC. He noted that overall neither the President nor any of his key advisors are too keen on how the U.S. has approached this issue, underscoring that we needed to get the bilateral relationship back on track. He added that the main challenge is "not so much the USG concerns about the EFCC and it doing better -- we get that and appreciate that -- but the way that we were talked to, as well as the closing down any dialogue with EFCC chairwoman and not giving her a chance, is what bothers us. "The Brits feel like you do on the EFCC and wanting to see results on key cases, but they have gone about it in a much better manner so that we are willing to listen to them." Ambassador pushed back, pointing out that without progress on cases such as that of ex-governor Ibori, there is probably not any likelihood that our posture would change, but that she would dialogue with him and others to continue to push for these prosecutions to be done in a transparent manner, with action that would bring Ibori and his ilk to justice.

¶14. (C) The Ambassador then asked Saraki point blank what Ibori had on the President that prevents him from being more forceful on seeing this through. Saraki said because we have had good chats over the last several months that he would be straightforward. He stated that there is no way that Yar'Adua would ever "pick up the phone to try to influence the EFCC or Chairwoman Waziri." Despite what the international community might think, Yar'Adua is committed to the rule of law, but Ibori contributed financially in a big way to his campaign -- everyone knows this. So the President is not in a political position to ban Ibori from some limited access to him. The Ibori situation is a problem for the President and he knows it and is doing his best to convince Ibori to hand himself over to the British authorities so that the country can move on. "We are all trying to convince Ibori that this is the best option for the country and the President, but Ibori is not on board yet to do this," he concluded. "Meanwhile, he added, the USG and the rest of the international community need to appreciate that Yar'Adua is not going to do anything to interfere with the EFCC investigation of Ibori, of any of the other ex-governors, or of anyone else who is brought before the EFCC.

¶15. (C) On Waziri, Saraki claimed that going by her resume alone she is highly qualified for the job, personally motivated to see these big cases through, and thus should be given a chance, instead of cutting the legs out from under her. A dialogue should be maintained even if the USG holds off on its training, he emphasized. "Give her six months do her job before you condemn her." Waziri now feels she has an EFCC team which is loyal to her and that is not trying to undercut her. She has stated that, with this new team, she hopes to be able to close some of these big cases soon. Ambassador stated that it was unlikely that dialogue could continue with Waziri, but wanted to encourage it with others in the government on this and other issues. Saraki again noted the concern the Nigerian leadership with the tone and style (threats, etc.) that were reflected in the recent U.S. demarche (Ref B.).

Niger Delta Next Steps

¶16. (C) Ambassador decided to move on and take the Ibori issue one step further by asking Saraki if the rumors that the government was considering making Ibori the Minister of the new Niger Delta Ministry were true. Saraki laughed, stating that the international community has to accept that hyperbole is the foundation of the Nigerian press, including blogs like Sahara Reporters. Given that he had just left Yar'Adua's three hour meeting on choices for the next cabinet, Saraki said that "picking a good candidate for the Niger Delta Ministry was what was holding up progress on announcing the

new Ministers." The Kwara Governor said that he and others working on the new cabinet list had provided the President with several criteria for this position: no previous involvement in politics, no ex- or current governor; and no EFCC skeletons. "What we are looking for is a technocrat from the region, who has credibility among regional leaders -- this has not been easy to find," Saraki said. (Note: The Saturday, September 20 Vanguard reported that the President "was believed" to have picked Albert Okumagba, an ethnic Urhobo who is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of BGL Limited, an investment banking firm. Okumagba, like several others whose names are being discussed, appears to meet the criteria Saraki describes above. End Note)

¶ 17. (C) On other Niger Delta issues, Saraki informed the Ambassador that an informal agreement had been reached with the factional Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta People (MEND) to announce a ceasefire until such time that all parties to the conflict could find a good candidate for the Niger Delta Ministry. (Note: Two days after the Ambassador-Saraki meeting, the Nigerian press reported that MEND had agreed to a temporary cease-fire with the goal of stemming the violence in River State in particular. In addition Secretary to the Federation (SFG) Ahmed told Ambassador September 15 that he would be meeting with Tom Polo's people and others to try to find a way to work out a deal so that things could move forward. End Note.) Ambassador mentioned that the United States and the UK had worked jointly together on a paper that could support GON efforts and that we had delivered an operational assistance non-paper to the President back in July. To date, she added, we have not gotten a response to the July demarche, while the US-UK paper had been delivered to the Foreign Minister and the Secretary of the Federal Government. Right now, Saraki said, people are still "smarting" over the U.S. behavior on the EFCC, so responses to overtures by the U.S. on the Niger Delta are probably lukewarm, Saraki said. "If we make a step the U.S. doesn't like on the Niger Delta are you going to pull your support, as you did on the EFCC?", he asked. Ambassador emphasized that the offers to assist on the Niger Delta are genuine.

Powerbrokers Around the President

¶ 18. (C) Ambassador took further advantage of the frank dialogue to ask who, beside Saraki, did the President rely upon? Saraki replied that his loyalty and assistance to the President came as a result of his ability to use his GF position to block Obasanjo and Babingida's candidate at the last PDP convention, held in April 2008. Since then, Yar'Adua has continually included him in high level conversations about federal government issues, such as the new cabinet line-up. The Kwara State Governor then added the following other governors to the list of people who can and do have influence with and access to Yar'Adua, noting that the single most powerful influence is his wife, Turai. On the list of influential governors, in Saraki's view, are the Katsina, Rivers, Kano, and Kaduna governors. Others include SFG Ahmed and Economic Advisor Yakubu. Saraki then asked what the Ambassador thought about National Security Advisor Muktar, as he did not seem to be doing his job of coordinating the government well. Ambassador demurred, saying that she understood Muktar had just had heart surgery and that she had not seen him in awhile. The Kwara Governor went on to add that he felt that Muktar had been ineffective in the position, as so many things requiring coordination just seemed to fall through the cracks. On the Muktar heart surgery, Saraki added that he seemed to be recovering well and was back on the job. Ambassador then asked about the President's Aide de Camp (ADC), wondering whether he was considered part of Yar'Adua's inner circle. Saraki explained that the "jury was out on the ADC," given his ties in the past as an Obasanjo loyalist. "Right now those of us close to the President are carefully watching the ADC," he explained. (Note: Ambassador's encounters with the ADC have always left the impression that he is not working in the best interest of the current government. He was promoted to

colonel under Yar'Adua in early 2008, but also worked in the Villa under Obasanjo. So comments that he is loyal to Obasanjo are not surprising. End Note.)

Cabinet Reshuffle, Timing

¶19. (C) Saraki told Ambassador that the timing of the cabinet reshuffle was imminent. He added in meeting with President Yar'Adua earlier September 21 that those in attendance agreed that at the upcoming Federal Executive Committee meeting (Nigeria's cabinet meeting) that the Ministers who were being let go would be announced. (Note: We are assuming that Foreign Minister Maduekwe will be staying on as he is currently representing the GON and Yar'Adua at the UNGA). However, he did not think that the names of all the new ministers would be ready at the same time, so those names will probably be announced later. The Kwara Governor said that the GON could announce Ministers who are fired after the September 24 or October 1 FEC meeting.

Yar'Adua's Health and the Supreme Court

¶10. (C) In wrapping up the meeting, the Ambassador asked about the state of President Yar'Adua's health and the pending Supreme Court decision. Saraki responded by saying "I am a medical doctor so I am not going to soft peddle the issue; the President has serious health problems." However, he added, "despite his kidney problems, I believe he can manage his illness with the right care and regular check-ups. This is something the country is going to have to understand." The Kwara Governor noted as an example that in the three hour session with Yar'Adua on the upcoming cabinet, the latter was articulate and had command of the issues. "He is not Obasanjo and not gregarious, but he is able to do the job," Saraki stated. On the Supreme Court ruling, the Ambassador reminded Saraki that when they last met in July 2008 he was confident that Yar'Adua would prevail in the high court's decision. She was curious given the recent health scare if he felt the same today. The Governor said he did not know, but thought the odds were more in the 50-50 range, and that the health issue did raise an additional specter of concern on the national psyche. He noted, however, that he did not expect the Supreme Court to render a decision until probably sometime in January or February 2009. Press reports showed on September 23 that the Supreme Court would begin hearing appeals testimony starting September 25.

¶11. (C) Comment: All in all Saraki seems to be becoming more of a key player on the national level and certainly has the ear of Yar'Adua. He was a lot less optimistic about how the Supreme Court would rule than he had been in his previous meetings with the Ambassador as health issues of Yar'Adua are more paramount on the minds of Nigerians. Succession scenarios on Nigeria's future are playing out with elites both in the North and South with bets being taken over whether the Northern group would allow VP Jonathan to assume a transitional leadership role at all if Yar'Adua became incapacitated. The new cabinet which is scheduled to be announced soon is also supposed to reflect more of Yar'Adua's small inner circle of friends as he seeks to consolidate his power more now than he has in the past, and better control his cabinet. This could be a good thing or bad, depending on whether the wall on access to Yar'Adua gets higher. It is already difficult to get in to see him. With the decision of the Supreme Court weighing heavily on Yar'Adua coupled with trying to manage the country's nervousness over his health, he probably sees Saraki's leadership in the Governors' Forum as a way to help him within the PDP, particularly as looming health questions continue to arise.

¶12. Ambassador drafted this cable while at CG Lagos.
BLAIR